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The Futures of American Literature

DANUTA FJELLESTAD & DAVID WATSON*

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In October 2008 American literature was catapulted into the international media limelight with the news that it was deemed to be unworthy of the prestige of the Nobel Prize by nobody lesser than the (now former) permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, Horace Engdahl. According to Engdahl, American writers were simply not up to Nobel standards: they were insular and ignorant, and they failed to participate in the big dialogues of literature. The response was fast, furious, and predictable: American literary critics and journalists hurled thunderous accusations at the Nobel committee. Michael Dirda, a Pulitzer Prize–winning book critic at the *Washington Post*, denounced Engdahl as holding "an insular attitude towards a very diverse country"; David Remnick, another Pulitzer Prize author and editor for literature at the *New Yorker*, pointed out that that the Swedish Academy itself has been guilty of conspicuous ignorance over a very long period: "You would think that the permanent secretary of an academy that pretends to wisdom but has historically overlooked Proust, Joyce and Nabokov, to name just a few non-Nobelists, would spare us the categorical lectures." Harold Augenbraum, Executive Director of the National Book Award organization, offered to send Engdahl a list, claiming that such comments made him think "that Mr. Engdahl has read little of American literature outside the mainstream and has a very narrow view of what constitutes literature in this age."[1]

The essays in this volume are penned by scholars who, unlike Horace Engdahl, are indisputably well read in American literature and who see it in the context of global literary trends. Less interested in identifying a single genus of American literature worthy of a Nobel Prize than curious about the future of literature, the writers address questions such as: What can we say about twenty-first-century American fiction? What are its dominant themes, stylistic characteristics, or aesthetics? What does it share with the novel outside of the United States? What are the new voices shaping its form? In short, what is the current state and the future of American literature after the "century of the American novel"?

The urgency of these and similar questions is inevitably prompted by the sense of the passing of postmodernism and the "death" of related poststructuralist theories. Titles such as "What was postmodernism?" (McHale 2007) and *The mourning after: Attending the wake of postmodernism* (Brooks & Toth 2007) attest to the passing away of the classificatory scheme that for decades has provided a framework wherewith to make sense of new literature, even if only to gauge its distance from a postmodernist aesthetic. This sense of an ending of a literary paradigm can be linked to a concern about the rapidly shrinking interest in (poststructuralist) theory since the late 1990s. Frantically, numerous critics were debating reading and thinking in the post-theory age (cf. Docherty 1996;

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[1]These and similar comments were widely reported in media; see for instance Simpson 2008.

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Cunningham 2002; Eagleton 2003). Less a concern for authors and publics than critics, this loss of the cognitive map provided by postmodern theory also meant the loss of a critical language whereby to recognize and talk about the new or, at least, the contemporary. This sense of loss, however, promptly gave way to intense forging of new frameworks for critical thought within which to make sense of literature.

But if postmodernism began losing its efficacy as a description of the contemporary by the turn of the century, then where are we now? At first glance the situation is much more complex than when Dale Peck, writing a decade ago, singled out two literary strains "in vogue," which he named "recherché postmodernism and recidivist realism," both of which, in his opinion, "suck" (220).[2] It would not be an exaggeration to say that we have entered a taxonomic wilderness in which there is very little agreement as to how to name the contemporary period, much less how to approach the notion of the contemporary itself. Perhaps a provisional account would indicate that three general approaches towards contemporary literature have emerged, though the boundaries between them are certainly porous: (a) viewing contemporary literature as broadly continuing well-established traditions; (b) periodizing the contemporary as a distinct epoch like postmodernism but breaking with one or more of postmodernism's distinguishing features; (c) attending to the contemporaneity of recent literature, how it relates to the world we live in and is shaped by its institutions.

From one perspective, a perhaps underappreciated effect of the weakening of the grip of postmodernism on accounts of contemporary fiction is that it brought into view postmodernism's others – realism and writing marked as ethnic. Aided and abetted by the cultural wars and multiculturalism of the 1990s, postmodernism's waning revealed how a focus on postmodern experimentation occluded throughout the so-called postmodern decades the continuation of a realist tradition adept at adapting to the times and the emergence of different ethnic literary traditions (see Hungerford 2008: 410–415). In the new century, accounts of contemporary fiction not only had to reckon with the loss of the familiar coordinates provided by the postmodern framework but also with the continuation of these traditions. Consequently, Christian Moraru (2011) zigzags between works by Don DeLillo, Suki Kim, Jumpha Lahiri, Azar Nafisi, and John Updike in his account of how a cosmopolitan and relational imaginary is supplanting postmodernism. In a reading of the ambivalently post-racial aesthetic of Colson Whitehead's novels, Ramón Saldívar (2011: 14) both identifies the emergence of a new literary genre, speculative realism, and claims, furthermore, that

> by returning to the real in its heterogeneous forms, we notice that realism acquires a different quality than literary history has assigned it over the last forty years. Instead of conceiving of a timeline that takes us from naive realism to plodding social realism, to triumphant modernism and demystified parodic postmodernism, something else results: When placed within a horizon that includes naturalism and realism, social realism, surrealism, magical realism, and perhaps speculative realism, Realism emerges as the substratum of narrative that has never been superseded entirely within the history of narrative forms. The aesthetic and political implications of this revision of literary history are immense and yet to be fully explored.

Indeed, a broad survey of contemporary fiction reveals not only that realism has not been superseded, but also that writing linked to particular forms of identity

[2]Peck's "recidivist realism" resonates with what James Wood (2004) calls "hysterical realism" and with Zadie Smith's (2008) much more positive term "lyrical realism."

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continues to proliferate. Authors such as Jonathan Franzen, Marillyne Robinson, Edward P. Jones, Ha Jin, and Louise Erdrich may be difficult to group together; nevertheless taken together they attest to the importance of realism and cultural pluralism to contemporary fiction.

Nonetheless, it would be a hard argument to make that contemporary fiction has completely forsaken experimentation. The weird worlds of Blake Butler, Brian Evenson, Ben Marcus, and George Suanders, the experimental minimalism of Lydia Davis and Jenny Offill, and the formal experiments of writers such as Mark Z. Danielewski suggest a lingering desire for formal innovation in recent literature. Concomitantly, contemporary criticism has continued to attempt to frame the contemporary as a period distinct from what preceded it. Sharing the "-modern" as a common reference point, terms such as "cosmodernism" (Moraru 2011), "digimodernism" (Kirby 2009), the "exomodern" (McGurl 2011), and "post-postmodernism" (Nealon 2012) orient themselves towards past cultural and literary formation to signal their rupture with them, consecrating the contemporary thereby as incommensurable with what came before. Inviting us to read the "modern" as *now*, the contemporary, these terms work by adding to this empty placeholder what they take to be its distinguishing feature. For Moraru, the contemporary needs to be thought in terms of the cosmopolitan networks and transnational cultural formations. McGurl, on the other hand, identifies the contemporary with an increased awareness of the longer temporalities that connect us to periods outside of and external to modernity. Kirby, in turn, invites us to imagine contemporary culture as an effect of digital technologies, while Nealon identifies the contemporary with the intensification of postmodernism and the multiplication of its effects. It is perhaps possible to suggest that these critics share an almost modernist desire for periodization, for a cultural and literary history marked by ruptures rather than continuities.

These large-scale attempts at defining the contemporary are complemented by more circumscribed attempts at linking contemporary literature to the world we inhabit. Concerned centrally neither with continuities with past formations nor with periodizing ruptures, this third approach to the contemporary might best be described as singling out the contemporaneity of literature, what Terry Smith describes in relation to fine art as the sense of its timeliness, that it is an "art of that which actually *is* in the world, of what it is to *be* in the world, and of that which is to come" (2006: 692). From this perspective, contemporary literature is simply the literature that is produced now, and it gives evidence of its contemporaneity by connecting itself to one or another aspect of contemporary existence.

Central to this approach is identifying what aspect of the contemporary to highlight: 9/11, the war on terror, financial crises, migrant movements, environmental concerns, new media, digital cultures, transformations in how we think of the family, sexuality, ourselves as human beings, animal life. The list is endless, and the results diverse. Timothy Aubry (2011) ascribes a therapeutic function to contemporary fiction, in particular works by David Foster Wallace, Khaled Hosseini, and Anita Shreve. Richard Gray (2011) takes 9/11 as the pivotal event shaping contemporary American literature, including the work of writers such as Don DeLillo, Claire Messud, Ken Kalfus, and Jonathan Safran Foer. In her reading of Richard Powers, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Marge Piercy, among others, Heather Houser (2014) shows how contemporary fiction is concerned with diagnosing what she terms "ecosickness." Ranging across a corpus of one hundred twenty-five recent American novels, Caren Irr (2013) identifies a resurgent political fiction concerned with geopolitical issues. Relatedly, new or refurbished genres are identified with a predictable

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regularity: speculative realism (Colson Whitehead and Junot Díaz), cli-fi (Peter Matthiessen, Lydia Millet, Nathaniel Rich), the credit crunch novel (Paul Auster, Peter Mountford, Joshua Farris, Jess Walters), the world-systems novel (Dave Eggers, Moshin Hamid), the neuronovel (Richard Powers, E.L. Doctorow, Rivka Galchen, Jonathan Lethem), hysterical realism (David Foster Wallace, Denis Johnson, Jeffrey Eugenides, Michael Chabon) – the list is as extensive as that of the various foci critics have selected to exemplify the contemporaneity of recent American fiction. Nearly all of these genres, unsurprisingly, ultimately name a literary response to a social factor.

A similar approach informs Peter Boxall's ambitious *Twenty-first-century fiction: A critical introduction*, in which he frames contemporary literature as a belated response to the representational crises instantiated by postmodernity's rearrangement of space and time. For Boxall, diverse authors like Eggers, Cormac McCarthy, Roberto Bolaño, William Gibson, Don DeLillo, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie respond to ruptures in how we think of time and the body, and how technological, political, and aesthetic forms relate to the material environment. Boxall firmly situates contemporary fiction within its political, cultural, and material contexts, nominating, unsurprisingly, the post-apocalyptic environmental novel as the genre with the strongest claim on the future.

But recent criticism also approaches the contemporaneity of recent fiction from a different angle than its relation to contemporary crises by paying attention to the institutionality of this fiction. That is as much to say that growing attention is given to the institutions and sites where literature is produced, shaped, and disseminated. MFA programs (McGurl 2009), New York publishing (Harbach 2014), even McSweeney's (Hungerford 2012) have all received attention as contemporary sites where literature is produced and shaped in particular ways. By drawing attention to how these sites molded literary production, critics clarify how the nature of recent fiction is contingent on the history and characteristics of non-literary institutions, thereby enabling a different way of mapping the contemporary. It may be possible to suggest, additionally, that what is emerging today is amongst other things a sociological approach to literature. Attentive to the various institutions modulating literary production – MFAs, publishers, but also challenges to print, and digital transformations – this approach is intent on positioning literature as one contingent institution among many others in the world.

Irrespective of the angle of vision or emphasis, all the essays in the volume take for granted that American literature does have a future, even if it is impossible to ignore the all-too-frequently voiced anxieties about the death of literature, of the novel, and of the print book. While this is not the place to rehearse such anxieties, it cannot be denied that the essays have been written in the shadow of an explosion of what is collectively referred to as "new media," an explosion that is rapidly changing the ecosystem of literary genres and forms as well as the production, reception, and circulation of books. These changes elicit both panic and euphoria, both moods spread through attention-grabbing titles such as "The end of books" (Coover 1992), *The Gutenberg elegies: The fate of reading in an electronic age* (Birkerts 2006), or *Print is dead* (Gomez 2008).[3]

The rise of new media, at least, proved less calamitous than some have imagined. At this point in time there seems to be a growing chorus of voices

[3]In 1998, *The New York Times* used the rubric "The last book" to report on the project at the Media Laboratory at MIT called "The last book." In Sweden in 2001, one of the pioneers of the sociology of literature studies, Johan Svedjedal, published a collection of essays entitled *Den sista boken* (Eng.: *The last book*, 2001).

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asking "to put an end to the digital utopias and print eulogies" (Piper 2012: xi) and to realize that the future entails a coexistence of print and electronic texts (Darnton 2009; Piper 2012) and that "print and electronic textuality deeply interpenetrate one another" (Hayles 2008: 160). This coexistence is not necessarily without tensions; the strategies of remediation, appropriation, and "poaching" characterize the contact zones between the two. Nevertheless, in literature, these strategies, as N. Katherine Hayles (2002; 2005) has indefatigably argued, may be seen as various ways of asserting the robustness of print. Strikingly, the mammoth *Cambridge history of the American novel* (2011) ends with Robert Coover's upbeat "A history of the future of narrative," in which he identifies the advent of the computer and the World Wide Web as groundbreaking for new literary formations; the future belongs to electronic texts, he predicts, even if "codex-style bound books with paper pages will no doubt continue to be published for a time" (1177). "Whatever the future may be," asserts Robert Darnton, "it will be digital" (2009: xv). Acknowledging "nothing is riskier than predictions," Hayles goes even further and proclaims "digital literature will be a significant component of the twenty-first century canon" (2008: 159).

One of the digital texts that have already entered the canon is *Inanimate Alice* by Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph (2005 onward). This web-based multimedia novel is the subject of investigation by John David Zuern in "Minds, messages, and the moral imagination in the media of fiction: *Inanimate Alice* between cognitive and rhetorical paradigms" in this volume. His insightful reading of the third of the novel's ten episodes, "Russia," shows how this electronic text activates the moral imagination of its readers/viewers/users by employing the affordances of digital media. Zuern balances his focus on the specificity of this born-digital text with an interest in the ethical agency of all literature; taken as a whole, the essay constitutes an important contribution to recent narratological theories about "reading minds."

Like Zuern, Alison Gibbons too takes up the question of contemporary literature's engagement with ethics, but she does so via a close stylistic analysis of Adam Thirlwell's *Kapow!* (2012), a multimodal novella which takes advantage of the affordances of paper. In Gibbons's reading, *Kapow!* offers a metamodernist vision of the present and future of literature: its role is to insist that readers think critically and defiantly about their own place and complicity in the intimately interconnected world events. In "The paradoxes of 'unnatural' mimesis in Gordon Sheppard's *HA!*" Danuta Fjellestad also focuses on recent experiments with the format of the book and the consequences of such post-postmodern experimentation for narratological approaches to literature, and for our understanding of the category of the unnatural.

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker also target contemporary experimental art to forward an argument about a paradigm shift from postmodernism to metamodernism in their essay "Utopia, sort of: A case study in metamodernism." They discuss David Thorpe's collages, Ragnar Kjartansson's performances, and Paula Doepfner's installations for their oscillations between decay and transcendence, the permanent and the transitory, melancholy and hope, enthusiasm and despair, seeing these oscillations as driven by an attempt to reimagine utopia. Thorpe, Kjartansson, and Doepfner are only three of many contemporary artists whose work signals that a utopian turn is part and parcel of the shift from postmodernism to metamodernism.

Turning towards a more canonical author, Don DeLillo, Pieter Vermeulen offers in "Don DeLillo's *Point omega*, the anthropocene, and the scales of literature" a theoretically rich account of the text that might very well be resistant to utopian imaginaries. In Vermeulen's reading, DeLillo's novel localizes contemporary debates about cultural transnationalism and cosmopolitanism within an expanded spatial and

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temporal frame that ultimately opens up into an engagement with a nonhuman otherness – the vast stretches of geological time in which the human hardly figures. Drawing on the theories associated with the contemporary nonhuman turn, including object-oriented ontology, Vermeulen poses the pressing question of whether the form of the novel is indeed capable of reckoning with the nonhuman world we inhabit.

Caren Irr likewise views the contemporary novel as inextricably linked to the world. Her "The space of genre in the new green novel" offers a synoptic account of the emergence of a group of novels dedicated to environmental problems and its complex relation to its predecessor. As Irr suggests, the new green novel functions in the mode of critique, targeting approaches to environmental problems grounded in liberal individualism in particular. At the same time, she identifies a strain in this genre that seeks to identify the potential for an alternative, collective response to environmental degradation. Susan Hegeman, in "A sociological imagination," is similarly interested in alternative social movements. Tracing the history of the "sociological imagination" through half a century, she argues that social movements, especially in the wake of the financial disaster of 2008, are the preeminent sites for the emergence of artistic and intellectual movements, movements which then can imagine the future of the present beyond the apparent closures of neoliberalism.

Finally, two essays in this issue turn away from explicitly addressing developments in contemporary literature, asking instead what this literature means for the traditional topoi of literary analysis. Petter Skult, in his "The role of place in the post-apocalypse: Contrasting *The road* and *World War Z*" illustrates how contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives such as the ones by Max Brooks and Cormac McCarthy force a reconsideration of how we make sense of place and space in literary texts. In "Walking as a metaphor for narrativity," Marina Ludwigs's investigation of Joshua Ferris' enigmatic *The unnamed* uncovers what walking – an involuntary activity in the novel – reveals about narrative desire and narrativity itself. Like Skult, she makes clear how contemporary texts force us to return to the classical categories of literary interpretation and rethink them for the still-new century.

The reader of this introduction will have doubtlessly noticed that we have audaciously – perhaps even brazenly – skipped what Caroline F. Levander (2013: 2) calls "the thorniest question of all," that is, the question of what counts as "American literature" or whether it makes sense at all to retain this designation in an increasingly global culture. An eyebrow or two may have been raised at the inclusion of an article on *Kapow!*, written by a *British* writer, in this special issue. We hasten to assure the reader that we have no intention to annex Adam Thirwell's book to American literature or to expand this category even further; instead, this article (as well as references to other non-American novels and authors) serves as evidence that trends in literature exceed national boundaries. This has always been the case. But we want to hold on to the concept of American literature and, to cite Sinclair Lewis's sentiment expressed in his December 1930 Nobel lecture, we have "every hope and every eager belief" for the future of American literature. Making no claim to comprehensiveness, this volume takes up the issue of the future of American literature in full awareness that whatever this future holds, it is unlikely to be what we expect.

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